

Qualities of a good essay: an assessment of the writings of Nigerian undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to discover the capabilities of Nigerian undergraduates in handling the salient characteristics of essay in English. Such qualities as clarity, economy, simplicity, unity and coherence were the variables in the assessment. The study was conducted within the framework of the theory of descriptive linguistics and its sub-discipline of stylistics. Four topics representing argumentative, descriptive, expository and narrative essays were given to students for each of them to voluntarily choose one and write on in a strictly supervised writing test. All the essays were marked on the above stated variables. Critical case sampling strand of the purposive sampling was used to select four outstanding essays each representing one of the four departments of the Akwa Ibom State University of Nigeria. Paragraph and sentence formed some of the units of analysis. It was found out that the four subjects whose essays were analyzed proved their mettle in producing readable and creative prose in the four genres with some room for improvement. It is suggested that the Use of English programme in Nigerian universities should be extended from one to two years in addition to regular practice in writing by students and feedback from lecturers.

Keywords: Essay, argumentative, descriptive, expository, narrative, stylistics, grammatical, lexis, phonological, linkages, transition, Economics, political science, religious, cultural studies, research, sampling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Essay is a particular type of writing. It has a French origin. It means to try or attempt. The verb form in French is *essayer* meaning to try. Note the phrase in French: *essayer de faire quelquechose* meaning to try to do something. An essay is a sizeable piece of writing on a particular subject undertaken by an individual. In the secondary school and in the university it is written as part of requirement for a course. The writer of an essay (particularly for publication) is called an essayist. In French essay that is written in the university is called *dissertation* while the one written in the secondary school is called *réécriture*. Whatever name it bears writing essay as composition is arguably an arduous task because of its inherent nature consisting of competence in the medium of writing, composition, rhetoric, aesthetics, philosophy and logic. This is in addition to the acquisition of a sound knowledge of the subject of discourse as Okono, U.M. (2020) observes:

It (essay) also requires a person to acquire a firm grasp of the subject of discourse as well as the world view and the views of others (e.g. consumers) on the particular subject of discourse.
(Okono 2020: 67)

A good essay must possess some salient qualities or characteristics that will make it rich in content and style. These qualities include but not limited to clarity, economy, simplicity and unity. Others are coherence, consistency and specificity. These qualities constitute the driving force of this research. The major objective of this research is therefore to examine how Nigerian undergraduates employ these qualities in their writing in the four genres of argumentative, descriptive, expository and narrative essays. It is the belief of this researcher that the findings and suggestions of this research will contribute some insights into the sub-discipline of writing for the achievement by both students and teachers of the production of creative, lucid and elegant prose.

2. METHODOLOGY

Two hundred and fifteen first year degree students offering Use of English in Akwa Ibom State University in Nigeria were given an essay writing test. The test had four topics each representing a genre of essay. The topics were as follows:

1. Write your entry for or against the proposition: Military Rule is Better than Civil Governance in Nigeria. - Argumentative.
2. Describe the Appearance of Your Father or Mother. – Descriptive.
3. Write an essay on: How to Prepare My Village Traditional Delicacy – Expository.
4. My Most Memorable Day. – Narrative.

The students were asked to write the essay in a maximum of 400 words within 50 minutes. The test was conducted under strict examination condition. Each student was instructed to write on one topic of his choice. The breakdown of the students according to department was as follows:

- ✓ Economics- 58
- ✓ Political Science- 52
- ✓ Public Administration- 60
- ✓ Religious and Cultural Studies – 45
- ✓ Total – 215

After the test it was found out that 48 students wrote argumentative essay; 30 students worked on descriptive essay; 43 students attempted expository essay and 94 students wrote narrative essay. All the essays in the study were scored on four variables: clarity, economy, simplicity and unity. Each of the variables attracted 25% making it a total of 100%. Purposive sampling method was used to select the best essay which also had the highest score per genre. Once an essay had been selected for a genre in the department, essay for another genre was selected from another department. The final selection had argumentative essay from Public Administration, descriptive essay from Political Science, expository essay from Religious and Cultural Studies and narrative essay from Economics.

The particular strand of purposive sampling used in this selection is called critical case sampling which is a type of purposive sampling in which just one case is chosen for study because the researcher expects that studying it will reveal insight that can be applied to other like cases. (<https://research.methodology.net>). In this regard, each of the four essays selected for analysis represents the population of writers of that genre in each department. The variables used in scoring the essays are a departure from the ones used in marking essays in school certificate examinations. The latter comprises content, expression, mechanical accuracy and organization. These variables however specify what is written and how it is written. But the variables in the present research are different; they specify mainly how essay is written. This is a stylistic slant. The units of analysis adopted for this work are sentence and paragraph. Simple percentages were used in calculating the scores and inferences drawn therefrom.

3. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE LIMITATIONS

It was not possible to analyze the 215 essays because of the sampling technique applied. Moreover, only five variables were tested and studied.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The major theory for this research is descriptive linguistics. According to Dineen, F. P. (1966: 1-12) a course in descriptive linguistics usually includes training in phonetics as well as in phonological and grammatical analysis. In this regard, units, categories, descriptive techniques, their value and justification come from a general theory of language founded on a good deal of experience in scientific description of languages. The sub-discipline that covers this research is stylistics and stylistics is clearly in the ambit of descriptive linguistics. As Crystal, D. and Davy, D. (1983:8) observe:

The aim of linguistically orientated, stylistic approach is clear: varieties of language need to be studied in as much detail as possible, so that we can point to the formal linguistic features which characterize them and understand the restrictions on their use.

Continuing, Crystal and Davy opine that in order to achieve the above stated end, we need systematic training and experience in describing the range of linguistic patterns which exist in English and the kinds of relationship which occur between language and society. The qualities of essay numerated in this research exemplify stylistic features as well as features of application and functionality. The other theoretical bases for this research ipso facto are systemic functional grammar (SFG) and applied linguistics.

A complete theory for this research must include some indices of creativity and composition for which good literature exists. These aspects include but not limited to the following: clarity, economy, simplicity, unity and coherence.

CLARITY

To write clearly is to avoid vagueness and ambiguity. Clarity is an inalienable quality of a good prose. A writing that is clear is understood with greater ease and sustains pleasure and interest. At the undergraduate level, majority of our students cannot communicate clearly in written communication because of their deficiency in the English diction and syntax. For according to Mc Crimon (2019:135):

Lack of clarity can be a result of faulty grammar or punctuation,
Misleading pronoun reference, vague or ambiguous wording or
Confusing sentence structure.

Arguing in the same vein, M.C. Iwundu in Oluikpe (2006: 103) enumerates causes of lack of clarity in students' essays to include faulty parallelism, fragmentation, dangling modifiers, ambiguity and wordiness.

ECONOMY

A writer who exhibits economy avoids wordiness, promotes pleasure through right proportion, sense of form and good choice of words. This is re-echoing the words of Ebele Eko (1981:4) who quotes William Strunk and E.B. White as saying that:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words,
a paragraph no unnecessary sentences for the same
reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines
and a machine no unnecessary parts.

Up to a point economy could be used interchangeably with brevity i.e. saying what one has to say in as few words as possible. By this arrangement wordiness and verbosity should be avoided. Words properly chosen and used will convey thought and action in a more accurate and concise manner.

SIMPLICITY

Simplicity in the context of essay writing or any other writing for that matter does not mean being simplistic. It does not also mean a plethora of short monotonous sentences or some puerile grammatical constructions. Simplicity here implies flexibility in the choice and use of monosyllabic and multisyllabic words.

UNITY

Unity of paragraphs in a prose is very crucial to the development of thought and theme. An essay could be conceived of as a cement house composed of blocks. The significance of the blocks among other things is that of sticking together to strengthen the house. If one block is knocked off, the wall may cave in. On the other hand, if too many ideas are packed into one paragraph, the prose may become a jumble of unrelated facts. In a good prose each paragraph contains a single idea and contributes to the development of the main thesis. Thelma Obah in Oluikpe (2006:209) corroborates the above assertion when she argues that:

A paragraph is said to have unity when it logically
develops only one idea to the satisfaction of the
reader. It violates the ethics of good writing when
it rambles from topic to topic.

Apart from the four characteristics discussed above there are others which deserve mention in passing. These are: coherence, consistency and specificity. Coherence literally means sticking together. Coherence in an essay may be achieved by the use of transitional markers, repetition of a particular idea, parallel structures and pronouns.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Our data from the research reveal that subject A, from the Department of Public Administration wrote the argumentative essay; subject B of the Department of Political Science handled the descriptive essay; subject C from the Department of Religious and Cultural studies attempted expository essay and subject D from the Department of Economics worked on narrative essay. The cumulative scores of the subjects are as follows: subject A- 74%, subject B- 83%, subject C-90% and subject D- 90%.

From the data gleaned from the study, subject A wrote his essay in seven paragraphs, 20 sentences and had 10 error-free sentences and ten sentences with blemish. Subject B wrote her essay in 14 paragraphs and 40 sentences. She produced 29 error-free sentences and 11 sentences with some infelicities. Subject C wrote her expository essay in 5 paragraphs, 20 sentences and achieved 17 appropriate sentences and 3 sentences with some blemish. Subject D on her part, produced an essay of 10 paragraphs, 34 sentences and attained 30 sound sentences and 4 sentences with minor flaws.

The data gathered from the study also show that for the variables subject A scored 13 in clarity, 18 in economy, and 18 in unity. Subject B clinched 18 in clarity, 20 in economy, and 20 in unity. Subject C achieved 20 in clarity, 20 in economy and 25 in unity. Subject D scored 20 in clarity, 20 in economy and 25 in unity. Interestingly, all the four subjects scored 25 i.e. 100% in simplicity. Similarly, all the subjects achieved 100% in coherence. The data are presented in tables 1-4 below:

Table 1. Showing Information on Subjects and Cumulative Scores

S/N	Subject Code	Department	Essay Type	Cum Score	%
1	A	Public Admin	Argumentative	74	74
2	B	Pol.Science	Descriptive	83	83
3	C	Rel.&Cultural Studies	Expository	90	90
4	D	Economics	Narrative	90	90

Table 2. Showing Number of Paragraphs and Number of Sentences Per Subject

S/N	Subject Code	No of Paragraphs	No.of Sentences	Error-free Sentences	Sentences with Blemish	% of Success
1	A	7	20	10	10	50
2	B	14	40	29	11	62
3	C	5	20	17	3	82
4	D	10	34	30	4	87

Table 3. Showing Subjects' Performance on Four Variables

S/n	Subject Code	Clarity	Economy	Simplicity	Unity	%
1	A	13	18	25	18	74
2	B	18	20	25	20	83
3	C	20	20	25	25	90
4	D	20	20	25	25	90

Table 4. Showing Performance of Subjects in Coherence

S/N	Subject Code	No. of Paragraphs	No. of Transition Markers	%
1	A	7	6	100
2	B	14	13	100
3	C	5	4	100
4	D	10	9	100

6. DISCUSSION

CLARITY

Clarity is an inalienable characteristic of a good essay. In our research we looked out for the causes of lack of clarity as outlined in the theoretical framework of the study to score each of the four essays. Since the sample essays are just four, it afforded enough time to read through them repeatedly for a proper analysis. Of course the essays sampled for the study were some of the best in the exercise. For

the avoidance of doubt the sentences in each essay were counted and thoroughly screened for any type of error. In this arrangement subject A wrote 20 sentences, exemplified some infelicities (lexical, grammatical, etc.) in ten of them and scored a miserable 50% in clarity. His error in sentence 11 showed *covenance* instead of governance. In his grammar in sentence 19 he wrote: *Lastly, the civil governance is mostly interested in the economic growth and development nation.* This is structurally defective. An appropriate structure should have been: *Lastly, civil governance is mostly interested in economic growth and development of nations.* The two instances of definite articles are intrusive and the absence of 'of' before *nation* is an omission.

Subject B who scored 80% in clarity exemplified some infelicities such as offence against natural truth in sentence 2 when she wrote in her descriptive essay: *She has a broad face, pointed nose, a set of sparkling white teeth* The truth is that a normal human being has two sets of teeth. In sentence 28 she wrote in her descriptive essay: *She detest, ... if she request... there is alway* These stretches should have been: *she detests..., if she requests..., there is always....* In sentence 35, she wrote: *She is a woman of integrity who does look down on anyone.* She actually intended to write: *She is a woman of integrity who does not look down on anyone.* This is a careless omission which negates the meaning of her statement.

Subject C who also scored 80% in clarity committed some blunders. For instance, in sentence 16 in her expository essay she wrote: *... add grayfish, pepper, salt and maggi and leave it for like two minutes.* The phrase *for like* is not a standard expression in English language. She could have been content to say *... and leave it for two minutes.* Subject D in her narrative essay in sentence 12 wrote: *... just not to sound overwhelm while talking to him....* The past participle is *overwhelmed*. Besides these anomalies the four subjects produced quite interesting prose that exemplified clarity. Apart from clarity they also brought in creativity which of course begets the beauty of language. For example, the opening sentence of subject D reads: *It was a cold morning, the morning breeze was nice, as I woke up, I couldn't help but smiled as I felt an inner happiness.* This is a beautiful sentence aided by the use of short form which some L₂ learners may consider odd but it is apt.

ECONOMY

Economy which is equated with brevity is an important ingredient of a good essay. None of the four subjects scored above 80% because of needless repetition. For instance, subject A in an argumentative essay wrote: *... while in the civil covenance (governance) the people are governed and ruled by elected personnel.* The use of *governed* and *ruled* is unnecessary repetition. One of the lexes would have served the purpose. Subject B in sentence 5 wrote: *She got married at the age of 25 to a young vibrant and handsome young man.* The words *and* and the second *young* are redundant. Subject C wrote in sentence 4: *After grating it, you go and cut plantain leaf...* Apart from being a transliteration the lexical item *go* is redundant. In sentence 22 subject D wrote: *Immediately it was 12 o'clock on the dot....* The prepositional phrase *on the dot* is redundant. More practice of writing and correction by the teacher can help solve some of these difficulties.

SIMPLICITY

None of the four subjects in this analysis went against the requirements of simplicity. None of them wrote high sounding words, jargons, or technical terms that would have necessitated footnote explanation or reversion to similar words or expressions. For example, John Macaulay wrote high sounding words: *Ornithological specimens of identical plumage invariably conglomerate to the nearest proximity* when he actually meant *Birds of the same feather flock together.*

Consequently, all the four subjects in this research scored 100% in simplicity.

UNITY

Unity as a salient quality of a good essay relates to paragraphs. A paragraph that has unity contains one idea which is developed to the satisfaction of the reader. (cf. Thelma Obah in Oluikpe 2006:209). Subject A for example in paragraph 2 brought two ideas: the difference between civilian personnel and military personnel as well as other reasons differentiating military governance from civil rule. The first idea has not been expatiated in the essay. The second idea deserved a separate paragraph for its development. Subject B in paragraph 12 bonded two ideas into it. The beginning of paragraph 12 should have been the end of paragraph 11 where she stated: *She is a sanguine in nature... she will (would) transfer her anger on (to) her children* should have ended the last line: *sanguine in nature...* to describe

that particular character. But *she loves swimming on Sunday evenings is her hobby* which is quite unrelated to the opening sentence. This is where competence in logical planning and sequencing comes in. Subjects C and D had no blemish in unity.

COHERENCE

The tendency of paragraphs, sentences, clauses and phrases to stick together to produce a unified whole is known as coherence. In this study the interest was on inter-paragraph coherence. Gladly all the four subjects scored 100% by the use of transition markers. Subject A who wrote an argumentative in 7 paragraphs produced the following transition markers: from paragraph 1 to 2, *In military rule* (an anaphoron); from 2 to 3, *Firstly* (adverb); from 3 to 4, *However* (adverb); from 4 to 5, *Furthermore* (adverb); from 5 to 6, *Lastly* (adverb) and from 6 to 7, *Summarily* (adverb). This is very beautiful and outstanding. Subject B wrote a descriptive essay in 14 paragraphs and exhibited the following instances of inter-paragraph coherence: from 1 to 2, *She*; from 2 to 3, *She*; from 3 to 4 *She*; from 4 to 5, *She*; from 5 to 6, *She*; from 6 to 7, *She*; from 7 to 8, *She*; from 8 to 9, *On Saturdays she*; from 9 to 10, *She*; from 10 to 11, *Her favourite meal*; from 11 to 12, *On (In) her bad mood*; from 12 to 13, *She*; and from 13 to 14, *She*. The repetition of the pronouns she or her at the beginning of each paragraph fosters inter-paragraph coherence. The pronouns are used anaphorically; they refer back to their antecedents.

Similarly, subject C wrote an expository essay (process narrative) in 5 paragraphs and produced instances of inter-paragraph coherence as follows: from paragraph 1 to 2, *Before preparing this meal*, (an anaphoron); from 2 to 3, *When all is being folded* (an anaphoron); from 3 to 4, *The soup used in eating this ikwe ekpang* (an anaphoron) and from 4 to 5, *After putting the beans on fire*. (an anaphoron). These transition elements are anaphorically applied. Finally, subject D presented her essay in 10 paragraphs and produced the following instances of inter-paragraph linkages: from 1 to 2, *As the clock clocked 8. 00 a.m.* (adverbial clause); from 2 to 3, *After ten minutes*, (adverbial phrase); from 3 to 4, *Finally*, from 4 to 5, *In as much as*; (adverbial phrase); from 5 to 6, *Immediately*; (adverb) from 6 to 7, *Finally*, (adverb); 7 to 8, *The reward came* (an anaphoron); from 8 to 9, *After an hour*; and from 9 to 10, *Finally* (adverb). In all the paragraphs written by the four subjects whose essays are analyzed in this research, the beginnings of the next paragraphs most of which are adverbials and/or anaphorons, are good instances of inter-paragraph linkages. They are technically known as transition markers. They (transition markers) have provided coherence for the essays.

7. CONCLUSION

The qualities of a good essay include but not limited to clarity, economy, simplicity, unity and coherence. When these ingredients are present in an essay of any genre, the essay becomes a creative and logical write-up. Apart from creating aesthetics for the language these characteristics ease understanding and appreciation of the particular essay. The contrary renders an essay vapid, insipid, tasteless, amateurish and reading such an essay becomes a terrible bore. The four subjects coded A, B, C, D who wrote a genre each proved their mettle in the inculcation of these salient qualities of a good essay. Only subject A scored 50% in clarity because of his careless mistakes in lexis and structure. The other three essayists were more accurate than him. Incidentally, subjects B, C, D were females, but gender was not considered a variable in this study. That was why it did not feature in table 1. The most creative and entertaining essay is the narrative essay of subject D. On the whole the subjects did well in producing readable and interesting prose. There is room for improvement.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

As it was stated in Okono (2020), the Use of English programme in Nigerian universities should be extended from the current one year to two years for a more thorough work in English considering our L₂ background. There should be more practice in writing by students. That is to say that writing should take a greater percentage of Use of English syllabus. Students should be guided on the stylistic requirements of each genre of essay. Oluikpe's (2006) assertion is however instructive:

If by poor performance, we mean that our students cannot write coherently, intelligently, clearly, vigorously and

persuasively, then a knowledge of grammar cannot be the answer to such problems because such problems are not the province of grammar but of stylistics.

The students need Stylistic devices in addition to functional grammar in order to produce the beauty of language in their writings. Students' essays should be corrected and given back to them for feedback. Regular practice in writing will enhance students' grammatical and creative capacities and Nigeria will enjoy better readership than has hitherto been the case.

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